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## The Libya Leak

Machiavellian foreign policy calculations played no part in the public dissemination of intelligence reports that Libyan hit squads were after the president. On the contrary, what happened is that Washington once again proved its inability to keep a secret.

When Col. Muammar Qaddafi then attacked President Reagan on national television, the administration found itself eyeball to eyeball with an opponent of incomparable unpopularity. The confrontation was then inflated for political purposes—but with results far less good than some imagined.

As a foreign policy matter, Qaddafi is no joke. He has made Libya available to the Soviet Union as a storage base for a fearsome collection of missiles, planes, tanks and other weapons. By a combination of bribery and terror, he has played havoc with moderate regimes in the Middle East, the Arabian peninsula, sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa.

The Reagan administration has a spotty record in dealing with Qaddafi. The Libyan leader has, of course, often been bad-mouthed by the president and other American officials. Two Libyan planes were shot down last summer after they attacked American jets that were on naval maneuvers in the Mediterranean.

But nothing like a concerted campaign has been under way. There are, for example, no anti-Qaddafi radio broadcasts beamed to Libya by this country. An American official at the United Nations who wanted to deliver an anti-Qaddafi speech had to do all the research himself because he found no cooperation in the State Department. Requests for help against Qaddafi by Arab leaders friendly to this country have repeatedly been brushed aside.

In moving against Qaddafi's latest foreign adventure—an incursion into Chad—the United States has relied chiefly on France, and a regional force composed of troops from African countries. That force is now in the process of replacing Libyan troops in Chad. High State Department officials, when they learned of the Libyan hit squad story, were concerned that publication might upset the delicate African operation. So the foreign policy logic, far

from pushing for a public confrontation with Qaddafi at this time, argued that it was far better to keep mum.

The same sort of logic should have been operating—and even more so—on the American intelligence and law-enforcement community. Intelligence reports of foreign plots to kill the president are extremely sensitive for a multitude of reasons. Publication of the information reveals sources, and warns the would-be killers. It starts lots of other people thinking about assassination. It complicates the task of protection. Last, since there is always a chance that the report may not be true, publication risks making Washington look ridiculous.

But the American intelligence community includes a vast and porous set of operations. It is constantly circulating reports for internal consumption. Its various organs are always briefing one another. There is competition for recognition—particularly among the bosses.

Exactly what part of the community first began leaking what part of the Libyan hit squad story is not clear to me. But the earliest accounts—first on ABC News, next in Newsweek and then in The New York Times—all bear fingerprints. The same fingerprints. The stories all appear to come from the intelligence-cum-law-enforcement community.

President Reagan was, accordingly, enraged by the leaks. But the White House did confirm the stories. Then, in an interview on the David Brinkley show, Qaddafi denied the charge of hit squads. He called Reagan "silly" and "ignorant" and "unfit" to be president. He invited the American people to "get rid of his administration."

So blatant a challenge from so odious a figure proved irresistible. Everybody in Washington suddenly began dumping on Qaddafi. The president convoked two meetings of the National Security Council and strongly intimated that a tough riposte was in the works. The White House staff tried to document the hit squad charges. The State Department accused Qaddafi of "murder."

The rhetorical buildup obliges the administration to take some retaliatory action. Several courses are open, but all—including pulling out American oil companies—take time to implement. As time passes, the credibility of the administration withers before the onslaught of the corrosive skeptics in the press and television.

So once more we are treated to the sorry spectacle of the intelligence community in this country. Operating secretly, it can serve a president and the national interest—as it did in the Cuban missile crisis. But when it operates semi-publicly, as it has in recent years, it hurts the president and discredits the nation.

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